

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PARIS 10009

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, FR, PINT
SUBJECT: FRENCH INTERNAL POLITICAL SCENE -- MARCH
1977

SUMMARY: THE LONG-AWAITED MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS RESULTED IN UNITED LEFT CANDIDATES SWEEPING INTO CITY HALLS IN UNPRECEDENTED NUMBERS, TAKING ABOUT 52 PERCENT OF THE TOTAL VOTE NATION-WIDE. FINAL TALLIES SHOWED LEFT MAYORS IN 157 OF FRANCE'S 221 LARGEST CITIES, THUS GAINING 60, AND OVER 100 ADDITIONAL NEWLY INSTALLED LEFT ADMINISTRATIONS IN MID-SIZED TOWNS (9000-30000). THE MAJORITY, IN THE FORM OF RPR LEADER JACQUES CHIRAC, SALVAGED SOMETHING IN WINNING THE FIRST PARIS MAYORALTY CONTEST, BUT DAMAGED ITSELF INTERNALLY IN THE PROCESS AS CHIRAC, GISCARD'S HANDPICKED CANDIDATE MICHEL D'ORNANO AND THEIR

RESPECTIVE CO-LISTERS TRADED RECRIMINATIONS RIGHT UP TO ELECTION EVE. THE MONTH ENDED WITH PRESIDENT GISCARD D'ESTAING ACCEPTING THE RESIGNATION OF THE BARRE GOVERNMENT ON MARCH 29 AND ASKING BARRE TO FORM ANOTHER CABINET, "FREE OF POLITICAL PARTIES." THE NEW GOVERNMENT (BARRE "BIS" AS IT'S CALLED HERE) WITH 13 OF 15 MINISTERS AND 17 OF 25 STATE SECRETARIES HELD OVER FROM BARRE I, IS MORE NOTABLE FOR ITS EXCLUSIONS THAN FOR ITS MINISTERS: MAJORITY POLITICAL STRONGMEN PONIATOWSKI (RI), GUICHARD (RPR) AND LECANUET (CDS) WERE DROPPED, IN HOPES OF CLEARING THE WAY FOR A MAJORITY RECONCILIATION. VGE TOLD THE FRENCH PEOPLE THAT HE HAD RECEIVED THEIR "MESSAGE" SENT VIA THE MUNICIPAL DEBACLE - AT FIRST GLANCE, HOWEVER, HIS RESPONSE LOOKS MORE CONFIDENTIAL

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LIKE A GISCARDIAN FORM LETTER WHICH EVERYONE HAS SEEN BEFORE. END SUMMARY

1. LIKE TOPSY: THE RIPPLE WHICH BEGAN FOLLOWING FIRST ROUND MUNICIPAL VOTING MARCH 13, ENDED ON MARCH 20 AS A TIDAL WAVE SWEEPING UNPRECEDENTED NUMBERS OF LEFT CANDIDATES TO VICTORY THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. A FEW STATISTICS TELL THE STORY: LEFT CONTROL OF 157 (VICE 97) OF THE 221 CITIES WITH OVER 30,000 INHABITANTS (81 SOCIALISTS, 72 COMMUNIST, 2 LEFT RADICAL, 2 DIVERSE LEFT); 4476 PS AND PC MUNICIPAL COUNSELORS IN THESE SAME CITIES AS OPPOSED TO 2588 BEFORE MARCH 20; 58 (VICE 28) OF THE 96 DEPARTMENTAL CHIEF TOWNS (COUNTRY SEATS) IN LEFT HANDS. SUCH SUCCESS WAS NOT ALTOGETHER UNEXPECTED. THE MUNICIPALS WERE NOT GENERALLY THE REFLECTION OF A BRILLIANT ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN - INDEED THE OVERALL TENOR OUTSIDE OF PARIS WAS LOW-KEY AND RESTRAINED. THEY WERE MORE THE CULMINATION

OF AN ELECTORAL STRATEGY REACHING BACK AT LEAST SIX
YEARS TO 1971 WHEN MITTERRAND TOOK THE REINS

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OF POWER IN THE PS AND CERTAINLY TO 1972 WHEN THE PS AND PCF JOINED IN THE COMMON PROGRAM. THE GAINS OF 1977 ARE IN FACT THE CONCRETE EVIDENCE OF A LEFT ELECTORAL STRENGTH WHICH HAS NOW GROWN FROM THE NEAR MAJORITY OF MITTERRAND'S 1974 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN TO A DEFINITE, IF NOT DECISIVE, MAJORITY OF AROUND 52 PER CENT.

2. THE MAJORITY: NOTABLE TRIUMPHS FOR THE MAJORITY WERE LIMITED TO PARIS, WHERE CHIRAC'S CONVINCING VICTORY WITHIN THE MAJORITY OVER RI CANDIDATE D'ORNANO WAS ALMOST MORE NEWSWORTHY THAN HIS ULTIMATE VICTORY OVER THE LEFT OPPOSITION, AND TO THREE CITIES OVER 30,000. IN FACT, OF THE LATTER THREE, ONLY QUIMPER AND CAMBRAI WERE CLEAR WINS FOR THE MAJORITY; MAUBEUGE REELECTED AN INCUMBENT PS MAYOR WHO LEFT THE PARTY RATHER THAN TAKE COMMUNISTS ONTO HIS LIST. IN PARIS, THE MAJORITY WON 69 OF 109 SEATS WITH (CHIRAC FORCES HOLDING 52 OF THESE), BUT LEFT GAINS WERE NOTED IN NEARLY ALL SECTORS OF THE CITY, EVEN IN THE FACE OF UNFAVORABLE DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS. CHIRAC HIMSELF WAS ELECTED MARCH 25 AS PARIS' FIRST MAYOR IN 106 YEARS, THUS ENHANCING HIS POLITICAL BASE BUT ALSO ACCEPTING THE RISK OF BECOMING ENTANGLED IN PROBLEMS AND ISSUES WHICH COULD PROVE DAMAGING OVER THE LONGER TERM. ALREADY HE IS CONTESTING THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE PREFET DE POLICE, WHOM HE WOULD LIKE TO BRING UNDER HIS CONTROL. IN GENERAL, THE MAJORITY GIVES THE IMPRESSION OF GOING FROM BAD TO WORSE. TO THE STRAINS CAUSED BY THE PARIS ELECTIONS WILL BE ADDED THOSE

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BETWEEN TOWN HALL AND THE ELYSEE, BETWEEN THE RPR AND THE GOF, BETWEEN THE CENTRISTS AND THEIR RI PARTNERS (CENTRISTS ON THE MUNICIPAL COUNCIL, WONDERING ABOUT THE WISDOM OF HAVING ATTACHED THEMSELVES TO RI COATTAILS, HAVE BROKEN OFF AND FORMED THEIR OWN GROUP). PERHAPS THE NEW TWELVE MONTH THREE-POINT GOVERNMENT PLAN TO HELP FAMILIES AND REDUCE UNEMPLOY-

MENT WILL SUCCEED IN BRINGING THE MAJORITY TOGETHER
IN A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE, BUT CURRENT EVENTS PAINT
A GLUM PICTURE NONETHELESS.

3. WITHER THE CENTER: THE EVENTS OF THE PAST MONTH
HAVE CLEARLY DEFINED THE NATURE OF THE CONTEST FOR
1978--THE LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS WILL POSE A CHOICE
BETWEEN LEFT AND RIGHT, BETWEEN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
THE COMMON PROGRAM (OR A STRATEGY OF RUPTURE AS SOME
SEE IT) AND THE POLITICS OF STATIC CONTINUITY REPRESENTED BY THE PRESENT GOVERNING MAJORITY. THE CENTER
OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM HAS BEEN SQUEEZED SHUT WITH
THE INCREASING BIPOLARIZATION OF THE ELECTORATE, AS
DEMONSTRATED IN THE MUNICIPALS: INCUMBENT CENTRIST
MAYORS LOST ABOUT HALF OF THEIR LARGE CITIES, TWO
CENTRIST MINISTERS WERE OUSTED FROM THEIR OWN TOWN
HALLS. ALTHOUGH POCKETS OF CENTRIST STRENGTH REMAIN
AND IN SOME CASES CAN PLAY THE DECIDING ROLE IN AN
ELECTION, BY AND LARGE THE CENTER HAS BEEN CO-OPTED
AS AN EFFECTIVE POLITICAL FORCE. PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANT, THE DECLINE OF THE CENTER HAS MEANT THE LOSS OF
A SIGNIFICANT PORTION OF PRESIDENT GISCARD D'ESTAING'S
POLITICAL BASE. CUT OFF ON THE RIGHT BY CHIRAC AND
THE RPR AND ON THE LEFT BY A SOCIALIST PARTY CAPABLE
OF ATTRACTING VOTES ACROSS THE CENTER SPECTRUM, VGE
HAS BEEN FORCED TO RETREAT TO A CABINET "FREE FROM
POLITICAL PARTIES" AND TO DECLARE HIMSELF ABOVE THE
POLITICAL FRAY.

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4. BARRE 1 TO BARRE 2: ON MARCH 29 VGE ACCEPTED THE
RESIGNATION OF PRIME MINISTER RAYMOND BARRE'S GOVERN-
MENT AFTER 213 DAYS IN OFFICE. BARRE WAS IMMEDIATELY
ASKED TO FORM A NEW "WAR" CABINET COMPOSED OF COMPETENT
ADMINISTRATORS WHO COULD: (1) DRIVE
THROUGH AN EFFECTIVE ECONOMIC RECOVERY PROGRAM; AND
(2) IMPLEMENT A "COMMON PROGRAM" OF THE MAJORITY TO
BRING NEEDED REFORMS TO FRENCH LIFE. GISCARD LEFT NO
DOUBT THAT THE FATE OF THE MAJORITY IN 1978 IS RIDING
ON THE SHOULDERS OF THE BARRE PLAN; THE PRIME MINISTER
NOW HAS A FIRM MANDATE TO CONCENTRATE ON PRODUCING THE
ECONOMIC UPTURN WHICH COULD GO FAR TO BOLSTER MAJORITY

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HOPES FOR 1978. REGARDLESS OF RHETORIC, HOWEVER, FEW FRENCHMEN EXPECT MUCH INNOVATION FROM THE NEW CABINET WHICH RETAINS 13 MINISTERS FROM THE PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT. ONLY POLITICAL STORGMEN PONIATOWSKI, GUICHARD, AND LECANUET HAVE BEEN DROPPED (IN AN EFFORT TO CLEAR THE AIR FOR A RAPPROCHEMENT OF THE MAJORITY) ALONG WITH DEFEATED CENTRIST MINISTERS BROUSSE AND DURAFOUR. THE BARRE PLAN SHOULD CONTINUE ON ITS PRESENT COURSE WHICH HAS SO FAR SHOWN PROGRESS, ALBEIT UNSPECTACULAR. AS FOR THE PROMISED REFORMS CONCERNING THE WELFARE OF THE FAMILY AND THE AGED AND JOBS FOR YOUTH, MANY OBSERVERS ARE SKEPTICAL THAT THIS "COMMON PROGRAM" OF THE MAJORITY WILL BE ANY MORE RIGOROUSLY OR EFFECTIVELY PURSUED THAN PREVIOUS GISCARDIAN PLANS. CHIRAC HIMSELF PRONOUNCED A MOST TELLING CRITICISM ON MARCH 30 WHEN, IN REFERENCE TO VGE'S LATEST PRONOUNCEMENTS, HE SAID, "TRUE REFORMS ARE THOSE MADE, NOT THOSE DISCUSSED."

5. TOWARD THE LEGISLATIVES: WILL THE LEFT WIN IN MARCH 1978? THE QUESTION IS FAR FROM ANSWERED DESPITE THE TIDAL WAVE OF THE PAST MONTH. LEFT LEADERS IN PARTICULAR HAVE BEEN EXCEPTIONALLY CIRCUMSPECT IN THEIR REACTIONS TO THE MUNICIPALS--NEITHER MITTERRAND NOR MARCHAIS COULD BE ACCUSED OF TRIUMPHALISM, ALTHOUGH BOTH ARE CERTAINLY PLEASED WITH THE RESULTS. A NUMBER OF FACTORS CONDITION THE ANALYSIS OF THESE MOST RECENT LEFT SUCCESSES:

- THE TRADITIONAL FRENCH REFLEX TO VOTE MORE CONSERVATIVELY IN NATIONAL ELECTIONS; AND
- THE GERRYMANDERED ELECTORAL CIRCUMSCRIPTIONS

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WHICH FORCE THE LEFT TO CARRY OVER 50 PER CENT OF THE TOTAL POPULAR VOTE TO WIN A SIMPLE MAJORITY IN THE ASSEMBLY.

AMONG THE MANY OTHER IMPONDERABLES MUST BE INCLUDED THE UNCERTAIN IMPACT OF THE BARRE PLAN, THE RELATIVE SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF MAJORITY RECONCILIATION, AND THE ABILITY OF THE LEFT TO MAINTAIN ITS MOMENTUM AND UNITY.

6. THE BEST DEFENSE IS A GOOD OFFENSE: THE MARCH ELECTIONS DEMONSTRATED THE ELECTORAL ASSETS OF THE LEFT WHICH MAY WELL CARRY IT TO VICTORY NEXT YEAR:

- AN UNPRECEDENTED ABILITY TO ACHIEVE POLITICAL UNION WHERE IT COUNTS THE MOST--AT THE BALLOT BOX. THE GENERAL CONCURRENCE OVER LEFT GOALS REACHED IN THE COMMON PROGRAM WAS EFFECTIVELY TRANSFERRED INTO

THE REAL WORLD OF ELECTORAL MANEUVERING AS SINGLE, UNIFIED UNION OF THE LEFT LISTS WERE PRESENTED IN ABOUT 200 OF THE 221 LARGEST CITIES.

--A CAPABILITY TO EXERT PARTY DISCIPLINE WITHIN BOTH THE PCF AND THE PS. WHERE NEGOTIATIONS ON COMMON LISTS FAILED, THE WEAKER PARTY ON THE FIRST ROUND DESISTED ALMOST EVERYWHERE IN FAVOR OF ITS STRONGER LEFT COMPETITOR ON THE SECOND. MORE IMPORTANTLY, SUPPORTERS OF THE DESISTING PARTY DEMONSTRATED LITTLE RELUCTANCE TO VOTE FOR THE REMAINING PARTY OF THE LEFT (NOT SURPRISING FOR PCF VOTERS BUT MORE NOTE-WORTHY IN THAT PS AND MRG ADHERENTS PROVED WILLING TO VOTE FOR PC CANDIDATES). IN THAT SENSE, THE PCF HAS EMERGED FROM ITS ELECTORAL GHETTO--NEVER BEFORE HAS SO WIDE A SPECTRUM OF THE ELECTORATE CAST VOTES FOR THE COMMUNISTS.

--A NEWLY FOUND ABILITY TO PENETRATE REGIONS HERETOFORE CONSIDERED BASTIONS OF CONSERVATISM, PARTICULARLY IN THE WEST. THIS VOTE IS PARTICULARLY INTERESTING IN THAT IT REPRESENTS CONSIDERABLE LEFT PROGRESS
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IN ATTRACTING CATHOLIC ELECTORS, ESPECIALLY THE YOUNG AND MILITANT (THE SAME PHENOMENON ALSO APPEARS IN OTHER REGIONS). THE LEFT ALSO MADE IMPRESSIVE GAINS IN THE EAST WHILE IN GENERAL SHOWING GOOD BALANCE NATION-WIDE.

--THE COMMON PROGRAM WITHSTOOD IN GOOD FORM THE ASSAULT OF THE MAJORITY WHICH CALLED IT UTOPIC AND "THE POLITICS OF RUPTURE." IN FACT, THE MAJORITY WAS NOT ABLE TO GENERATE REAL DEBATE ON THE MERITS OF THE PROGRAM OR TO PROPOSE A PLAN OF ITS OWN IN OPPOSITION. THE LEFT TALKED OF PROGRAMMATIC CHANGE WHILE THE MAJORITY RELIED ON SLOGANS--THE ELECTORATE CHOSE CHANGE.

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7. ALL IS NOT HARMONY AND LIGHT: THE UNION OF THE
LEFT IS NOT WHOLLY WITHOUT PROBLEMS OF ITS OWN, HOW-
EVER, AS THE LAST DAYS OF MARCH DEMONSTRATED. SOCIAL-
IST FIRST SECRETARY MITTERRAND LAUNCHED A CAMPAIGN
JUST AFTER THE ELECTIONS TO FORCE CERTAIN FACTIONS OF
THE PS, NOTABLY THE LEFT WING CERES, INTO MORE UNIFORM

SUPPORT FOR PARTY. THE CERES IS CHARGED WITH GIVING AWAY AT LEAST TWO MAJOR CITIES (REIMS AND ST. ETIENNE) TO THE PCF AND WITH FAILURE TO PROVIDE WHOLEHEARTED SUPPORT TO SOME PS CANDIDATES ELSEWHERE. IN THE MOST FLAGRANT VIOLATION OF PARTY UNITY, THE CERES FACTION IN TOULON SUPPORTED A PCF LIST AGAINST SOCIALIST CANDIDATES. MITTERRAND IS NOW DETERMINED TO BRING CERES AND OTHER SMALLER FACTIONS INTO LINE AND CAN BE EXPECTED TO TRY TO SETTLE THE ISSUE ONCE AND FOR ALL AT THE PARTY CONGRESS IN JUNE.

8. MARCHAIS HAS LAUNCHED ANOTHER POTENTIAL PROBLEM FOR THE UNION OF THE LEFT WITH HIS MARCH 31 CALL FOR A SUMMIT TO REVISE AND UPDATE THE COMMON PROGRAM (PCF PROPOSITIONS INCLUDE EXTENDING THE NATIONALIZATION PROGRAM TO INCLUDE THE STEEL, AUTOMOBILE, AND PETROLEUM INDUSTRIES). BOTH MITTERRAND AND MRG LEADER ROBERT FABRE HAVE ACCEPTED THE INVITATION AND THE MEETING IS EXPECTED TO BE HELD IN LATE APRIL OR EARLY MAY. ALTHOUGH THE COMMUNISTS PROBABLY HAVE LITTLE HOPE OF ACHIEVING MAJOR REVISIONS (AND THE PS HAS ALREADY RESPONDED QUITE CLEARLY THAT THE SUMMIT WILL NOT BE A "RENEGOTIATION" OF THE COMMON PROGRAM), THE TALKS WILL FORCE THE SOCIALISTS TO PUBLICLY RECONFIRM THEIR DEDICATED

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CATION TO THE NATIONALIZATIONS ALREADY AGREED TO AND THUS HELP TO PROTECT THE PCF FROM IDEOLOGICAL BACKSLIDING ON THE PART OF ITS PARTNER. THE PS WOULD PREFER TO LEAVE THE REVISION AND ELABORATION OF THE COMMON PROGRAM TO LESS VISIBLE WORKING GROUPS SO THAT THE PARTY CAN ACT ON A MORE GENERAL LEVEL TO REASSURE A BROADER SPECTRUM OF THE ELECTORATE. FOR THE PS, SUCH REASSURANCES MEANS MINIMIZING THE IMPACT OF NATIONALIZATION AND AN EMPHASIS ON PROPER INDEMNIFICATION.

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